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ABSTRACT

A description is given of "Operation Rescue," a program designed to find and implement solutions to the dropout problem. A discussion of the reasons students drop out of school takes into consideration the pressures of society that tend to overwhelm at-risk students. These include environmental, academic, survival, and social factors that impinge upon students in the lower socioeconomic strata of our society. A brief overview of research on dropouts offers insights into successful dropout prevention programs, the barriers to success of such programs, and the lessons that have been learned from dropout programs that may be helpful to others in developing their own programs. Suggestions are made for incorporating knowledge about dropout prevention in teacher education programs. These include leadership training, designing effective programs, learning to negotiate and develop grants-in-aid, personalizing curriculum, collaborating with community and businesses, and advanced decision-making skills. (JD)

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REFOCUSING SCHOOLS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION: WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

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REFOCUSING SCHOOLS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION:

WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

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We have a national crisis. Each year, more than 1,000,000 of our students, our children, drop out of school or are chronically truant. The critical nature and impact of the dropout problem requires immediate, direct, and focused action. The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (NFIE) has designed OPERATION RESCUE for teachers to lead in such direct action to find and implement solutions to the dropout problem.

Background of OPERATION RESCUE

The path to our country's economic stability passes through the doors of our schools every day and there are no detours. Yet, we allow 27 percent of our teenagers to drop out of school every year. This tragedy threatens to undermine the economic health of our country.

- Nationally, one of every four students entering the eighth grade will drop out before graduating; the ratio jumps to two of four in the inner cities.
- Dropout estimates for Native American, Hispanic, and Black youth range from 35 to 85 percent.
- The country's entry-level labor pool -- 14 to 24 year olds -- is shrinking. Dropouts in this pool significantly increase training costs for businesses.
- In 1985, businesses spent $40 million to teach remedial reading, writing, and math.
- American citizens pay more than $75 billion a year in unemployment, welfare, and other costs for dropouts and their families.

There is no one reason or cause for students to drop out of school. The causes are really symptoms of the pressures of our society that overwhelm our youth. And almost always, these symptoms combine in their influence over the at-risk student to drop out. They may be grouped into four categories:

- Environmental factors. Students from a low socio-economic background are at a great disadvantage. Their opportunities are limited; moreover, home and school life are often in conflict. For a variety of reasons these children do not find support at home for their education. Increasingly, they may feel isolated, and withdraw from school life.

- Academic factors. Students who drop out often perceive school as a hostile place to be. Their history of failure often stems from a conflict with school authority. Students may have learning difficulties or disabilities, fear violence in the school, or find it hard to cope with language barriers. Seen through their eyes, school is inflexible, unresponsive, and unconcerned about individual needs.

- Survival factors. To the student who needs money to help the family, or wants it for self-support, being outside school looks better than being inside -- a vision that leads to a bleak future. Other survival factors contributing to dropping out of school are teenage pregnancy and teenage marriage.

- Social factors. When teenagers experience problems that seem overwhelming to them, they often turn to drugs, which only intensify their problems. Drugs, in turn, lead to crime. Over 83,700 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 19 are in correctional institutions. The vast majority are dropouts. In fact, more than half the total of the nation's prison inmates are dropouts.

With conditions like these, a call to action is essential and must be immediate. In 1985 the National Education Association issued such a call to action and created Operation Rescue for dropout prevention, with $1,700,000 for a direct grants program and the beginning of an endowment from which to fund other grants programs of similar need. The fundamental concept of Operation Rescue is to provide teacher leadership in developing the collaborations required to find solutions to the dropout problem at the local school and community level.

NFIE's Research

In order to focus Operation Rescue most sharply for greatest effectiveness in direct action, NFIE began a case study research project to learn what works in dropout prevention. NFIE surveyed dropout prevention programs in operation nationwide, classified different types of programs, and planned Operation Rescue Information Exchanges in four cities, with a National Information Exchange to synthesize results.

In these four local Information Exchanges, over 300 practitioners in a wide variety of fields participated. They all, in some form or another, were working with at-risk students and dropouts. They included teachers, counselors, principals, students who had dropped out or reentered, directors of dropout prevention programs, local and state superintendents, local and state board of education members, social workers, cultural council members, parents, researchers, business leaders, local government representatives, criminal justice personnel, and other support services. In addition, fifteen national organizations sent representatives to the Operation Rescue Information Exchanges.

We listened to local, state, and national perspectives as participants discussed three questions with directors of dropout prevention programs: (1) What are the successful components of your program, and why are they successful? (2) What barriers to success have you experienced, and what strategies are effective in overcoming them? (3) What lessons have you learned from your experience that would be beneficial to others developing their own dropout prevention programs?

At the National Information Exchange, May 30, 1986, NFIE listened to the results being presented. From all that was said in all the Information Exchanges, a synthesis was made and published as A Blueprint for Success -- seven principles for dropout prevention.

The seven principles of the Blueprint involve a number of considerations for teacher education.

1. Believing the Impossible Possible -- A clearly articulated VISION is the beginning for an effective dropout prevention program.

Committed, creative leadership is needed that enables the belief in the impossible, the taking of risks, the chancing of failure, the unrelenting persistence to begin

again and keep trying with different approaches until we succeed.

We heard those working with at-risk students tell us that we must "believe that we can make a difference." We need to "act as visionary leaders -- remove current barriers to realizing what is possible." We must "convey the vision to the students to instill hope for the future." If something doesn't work, "develop alternative solutions; keep trying alternative approaches -- don't give up."

When a teacher or teachers have a vision of what should be done to help students stay in school, they must have the leadership skills to spread that vision and lead others into it. They need the skills to design a program, and develop and negotiate a grant. This is a complex process, from needs assessment to conceptualizing a program, developing objectives, designing strategies and activities to fulfill objectives, evaluating effectiveness of efforts, writing proposals, and negotiating grants.

2. Restoring a Human-Centered Base -- The human connection is all important as a prerequisite for success in meeting the needs of those students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

The statement most often repeated in the Information Exchanges was, "Establish a human connection with the student -- care." And we heard, "Make students feel wanted, help them care for someone else." We heard repeatedly that outreach to parents is essential for them to become allies: "Expect that parents' contributions will be valuable. Provide realistic opportunities for parents to get involved." And practitioners said about the school: "Understand the school culture and build upon it. Make school a warm, safe, positive experience for students."

For teachers to lead in restoring this human connection with students, they must break standard patterns that focus on the group and, instead, develop one-to-one relationships with students and reach out to parents. They need to make the school perceived in relation to people rather than as a cold, isolated building.

3. Interactive Intersections -- Collaboration is required to provide total and comprehensive services to the total person.

Neither the educators nor the community nor the family can do what is necessary alone. We all need to work together for the individual student's achievement and growth. In getting together as a team, we were told to "share responsibility for coordinated decision making and

action." We were told to search for collaborators with the commitment and the flexibility to work effectively with the students: "Act, in collaboration, as an opener of doors, a developer of talent, a trainer, a coach, a sponsor, a positive role model, a mentor." Collaborative planning would involve such action as: "Set up advisory groups, involve the community, and listen"; and "Find out what the community wants its graduates to be able to do." It is essential to "plan carefully to coordinate education, work experience, and support services." To provide collaborative services and financing, we were told, "Form clusters of teachers, management, community, and business to provide services." And, "Combine people power with money power -- get dollars committed."

Teachers need the leadership skills to develop the required collaborations. This outreach usually involves working with people, agencies, and groups with whom teachers and other educators may not be accustomed to working. This collaboration is a new experience for most, and involves collaborative planning as well as delivery of services.

4. The Only Axis -- Student-centered education involves the uninvolved, reduces the risk of students' dropping out, and enables them to become productive in society.

The sooner we can intervene with at-risk students, the better our chances for success. We were told emphatically, "Begin at least in elementary school -- high school is too late for too many." In identifying students at risk, we were told to "involve teachers as members of a team identifying students who are at risk. We heard, "Look for the invisible dropouts -- those whose imaginations have dropped out though their bodies are present." We heard much emphasis on student development: "Enable students' self-image and self-esteem to grow." We were encouraged to "help students grow emotionally and socially as well as academically." And we were warned, " Develop positive peer culture to counteract negative street culture." It is important to "make the connection between success in school and success in later life." For such student-centered education, it is essential to develop personalized program and curriculum, personalized instruction, and personalized support services. Then we need to help students make the transition from one environment to another, from one school level to another, and from school to society.

Identification of at-risk students is all too often an administrative decision based on students' academic and attendance records, with little involvement of teachers and other personnel who work with the students. Human judgment is often more reliable than records. Teachers and others in

collaboration need to be brought into the identification process for early intervention.

5. Local Traffic Only -- The classroom level is the essential focal point for effective dropout prevention programs, with local building management and total participation.

Collaborative decision making at the school building level is essential from design to delivery to accountability. Delegating authority means shared leadership. We heard, "Encourage the leadership of others." More strongly, we heard, "Flatten the hierarchy -- avoid top-down administrative overlay. Provide participatory decision making." This means, "Allow professionals to make decisions and to lead." This approach leads to a conclusion about restructuring the school: a personalized, student-centered program requires much revamping of the school's delivery systems to make them appropriate for the complex society that now exists.

If the individual needs of at-risk students are to be met at the school building level, teachers and others in the collaboration need greater decision making roles in the school. Teachers need to be involved in the restructuring of schools for personalized curriculum and personalized instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students.

6. Empowering All to Help -- Training must be a whole school and community phenomenon.

Training involves all people working with students at risk -- teachers, principals, counselors, community participants, business leaders, volunteers, parents, service providers, and other collaborators. We were told, "Make training experiential, not theoretical; use on-the-job experiences." With a focus on the student, we heard, "Increase understanding of adolescent development and behavior so that collaborators can meet students' emotional, social, and medical needs."

Not only teachers, but all those collaborating on the team working for at-risk students need ongoing training -- not just isolated inservice days, or one-time training sessions, but ongoing interactive training enabling all collaborators to work with each other more effectively and thus to work more effectively with at-risk students.

7. Mine and Ours -- Empowerment of collaborators and students will result from their sense of ownership of their dropout prevention program.

To empower collaborators, we were told, "Give everyone a chance to invest in the school. Enable everyone to find

fulfillment through giving what they know and do best." To get everyone involved, we were told, "Negotiate the investment of local community and business leaders' time, knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve their ownership in the program." For the greater goal of student empowerment, we were told, "See that all students succeed -- that's our mission." Listen for the student to say, "I was finally heard." And, finally, listen for the student to say, "I've done it. I'm ready."

When teachers and other collaborators are empowered to work effectively with students, they can reach the primary goal of empowering the students -- enabling them to have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to meet the challenges they will face and the changing society will face in the future.

Operation Rescue Grants Program

Following the Information Exchanges, NFIE began awarding grants to local teachers associations for collaborative efforts in dropout prevention at the local school and community level. Ten grants totaling approximately $300,000 have been awarded to teachers associations across the country -- Ann Arbor, Michigan; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Boise, Idaho; Glendale, Arizona; La Crosse, Wisconsin; Gainesville, Georgia; Los Angeles, California; Woodland, California; Bardstown, Kentucky; and San Antonio, Texas. A third round of grants is being negotiated at this very minute.

Although each of these grants is unique, in that each has been designed to meet local needs under local circumstances, there are striking similarities among them in embodying principles of A Blueprint for Success. NFIE is learning much from the experiences of these teacher-led programs in the various sites. Teachers are using leadership skills beyond anything ever possible in an isolated classroom. And they are integrating their expertise into the entire community.

Some of the reports coming back to NFIE from the grants are both strong testimony of the effectiveness of teacher leadership being exerted and indications of the kinds of skills that must be fostered for further effectiveness.

The teacher who is project director for one Operation Rescue grant reported about the improved relationships with both the school administration and the community:

> ". . . in the district we have validity, we are real people, we brought in the money. . . . They step out of the office to speak to us . . . they call us by name

> and everybody in the building knows who we are. In twelve years no one knew my name . . . now they know. Plus, we speak in the community a lot. The business and corporate leaders are very impressed . . . there is entree to the community because we brought home this money. We have an opportunity to at least present our case to someone; they are ready to listen to us, to be educated about what we are doing."

From another teacher leader directing an Operation Rescue grant, we heard more about the increased credibility with the community:

> "We proved to people in the community that we have good ideas and that we can do something to solve local problems but that we need the autonomy to do something about those problems. You can't blame the schools for everything and then tie their hands behind their backs so they can't take care of solutions. . . ."

The effect of the teachers in changing the school board's perceptions and leading to school board action is noted by another teacher who is project director of an Operation Rescue grant:

> "At the time we received the grant, our teachers organization was having difficulty with the school board. This grant opened up communication . . . they realize that we are not there just to protect teachers' rights but that we are part of kids too. The board even set up a study commission based on our concern to see what the problems were with dropouts."

These are but a few of the reports that are coming back. These teachers, working in collaboration with school administrators and leaders in their communities, are making great strides in combating the dropout problem in their schools. But we cannot applaud these successes without recognizing, at the same time, that there are many needs to be filled for many teachers to enable them also to have such successes. In many cases, the talents and capabilities are there, but the experience and the opportunity are still to be found.

Implications for Teacher Education

The principles of A Blueprint for Success and the experiences of teachers and others working together for dropout prevention in the Operation Rescue grants have much to say about the preparation of aspiring teachers and the inservice education of practicing teachers. The schools and colleges of teacher education in this nation do a careful

and highly professional job of training teachers for the classroom. None of what follows is a criticism of teacher education. Rather, it is intended as suggestions for teacher educators to consider in expanding and making even stronger the preparation of teachers to meet the requirements of their changing and expanding roles.

1. Leadership Training. Teachers may be well trained for instruction of their students in the classroom. They need additional training to become leaders in changing schools to meet the individual needs of students. They need training in developing personalized curriculum and personalized instruction.

2. Program Design. If teachers are to be able to translate their visions into workable programs to help at-risk students, they need the skills necessary to develop programs. They need to be able to assess and identify the need in the school and the community. They need to be able to develop goals and objectives for the program to work. They need to be able to develop effective strategies to meet those goals and objectives. They need to be able to evaluate the results of their programmatic efforts. And they need to be able to develop budgets for their programs.

3. Grant Development and Negotiation. The next step following the ability to design an effective program, is to be able to translate that into the development of a proposal. This is true whether the proposal is to go to the school principal, the school board, or to an outside funding agency. Proposal development is a logical extension of the components of lesson planning, but on a much larger scale. Teachers can be taught to use their lesson planning skills as a basis for program development and grant writing. When the grant is written, teachers need the skills to follow the proposal to completion and funding in the grant negotiation process.

4. Personalized Curriculum and Instruction. Teachers need the skills to go beyond a standardized program for the total class. They need to be able to personalize the curriculum and their approach to instruction in order to meet the individual needs of students. And perhaps most difficult of all, they need to learn how to do this under existing conditions of so many students per class, probably with no teacher's aide, of so many fixed class periods in a school day, of the learning objectives that must be met, and of other responsibilities they must fulfill. Or they need to learn how to negotiate the changes in the school structure that would enable them to personalize curriculum and instruction.

5. Collaboration. Teachers are usually accustomed to working in team situations with other teachers, with school

counselors, and with school administrators in their local school. However, they usually lack experience in broader collaborations involving individuals, groups, and agencies outside the school. These may include local business leaders, community leaders, community service groups, and others. Teachers need skills for this expanded scope of collaboration.

6. Decision Making. In the process of decentralizing authority and providing greater latitude for professionals in different roles to make decisions, teachers need advanced decision making skills. They need to be able to fulfill responsibilities in their expanded roles.

The schools and colleges of teacher education can have a major impact on the effectiveness of the efforts going on in local schools and communities nationwide to combat the dropout crisis. In both inservice education programs for practicing teachers and in preservice education programs for aspiring teachers, teacher education faculties can address these skills needed by teachers to take leadership roles for dropout prevention. Indeed, these needs go far beyond dropout prevention. They extend to virtually all strong and innovative, professional approaches to improve the effectiveness of our schools' educational programs.

We all know that positive, constructive educational change is necessary. Schools and colleges of teacher education can have a powerful role in fostering and enabling that change to be what our society needs for a strong, educated citizenry and fully capable work force.